*"They were in my rooms for half an hour looking for computers, radios and other equipment. I carried the computer in my arms like a child. It was covered with a scarf and I carried it from room to room while the Taliban followed me. They did not speak to us at all and had covered their faces so that only their eyes were showing. They showed us by a sign that we should be quiet. When they left I took the computer to my brother's office."* **Mazar-e-Sharif**

In Herat and Kandahar small, isolated offices were made available to female staff in local hospitals and male relatives had to accompany the Kandahari women constantly, while in Herat they were only required for trips outside the city. The apparent advantage of an office was not without its problems, however, and along with definite feelings of isolation, loneliness and disassociation from normal office activities there were other, more serious incidents:

***"My colleague was beaten after the head of our office came to speak to her about a work issue. The director of the hospital was very angry and came to punish her by hitting her face two times in front of everyone. She was crying because she felt ashamed and she was upset because she was blameless.. Our head of office was also upset, as he did not want to cause her this problem. Ten days after this***



**WFP Female Staff working for the bakeries operation in Kabul**

***incident my colleague left to go to Germany and I was alone there and nervous."***
**Herat**

A Kandahar-based staff member commented that, *"Every hour that we worked was hidden from them (Taliban) and it was only the hospital staff who knew why we were there. If we were leaving to go to Islamabad for training or a conference, we told lies to cover our absence from duty. But this used to worry me very much and I spent many hard days thinking about all that could happen to us because we could have been arrested for even this simple thing of attending a workshop."*

A female WFP employee working in Faizabad under the opposition Northern Alliance rule described similar difficulties in being allowed proper freedom to work, and went to the extent of bringing her brother from Islamabad to live with her so that she could continue with her work:

***"In Faizabad it was the Northern Alliance who were in power but I found no difference between them and the Taliban as they also treated women badly. I had to bring my brother with me and hire a private house for us both. It was a problem because he could not find work there and he had to come with me on work duties at times when I could not go with WFP colleagues. This made him jealous sometimes, as it was not good for him to be without a job. I wanted to work in Faizabad for the adventure, not the money. Plus, I like politics – they are a woman's business!"***
**Faizabad**

This woman eventually had to leave Faizabad after a series of confrontations with the authorities: *"It was not good to be unmarried as this gave the government the chance to say bad things about me. They accused me of wearing Pakistani clothes, of being too independent, of smoking and drinking, saying that I talked with foreigners and even hired a house on my own. All this meant that I could not be a 'good Muslim' and although my family knew these things were not true, still they were very upset by these allegations against me. Women needed a lot of support to work in the field but to be able to do it at all we also had to be a bit independent."* Eventually, when these allegations of "misconduct" escalated into verbal threats

on her life, she was left with little choice but to abandon the fieldwork to work for WFP in Islamabad.

Four women from the Kabul office were not so fortunate. They spent four days in jail, having been arrested outside the WFP office. They had come to secure a release form for wheat, and without attempting to enter the office, they were conducting their business from their taxi when Taliban from the Office for the Prevention of Vice and Promotion of Virtue apprehended them at the gate:

> ***"They took us to the back of the building, then separated us and gave us a list of questions to answer so that they could compare what we said. There were a lot of questions about ourselves - Who are we? How long have we worked for WFP? We answered all the questions honestly because we were afraid. Then they took us and put us in jail. We were there for four days. They told us we were there because we worked with foreigners. They searched us and we were crying, crying, crying because this was a big shame to us to be put in jail. Really it was a too difficult situation – Afghan women are very proud. None of our relatives even knew where we were and they were very worried. There was nothing in the jail and we just had to sleep on the floor and sometimes they brought us some food in the kind of basins that you feed animals from so we could not eat. After three nights they released us and told us, 'You are Afghan – if you are working again with WFP or any other foreign agency we will kill you and make an example to others.' I left some time later for Islamabad but my relatives in Kabul found out that I had been in jail and did not believe I was innocent - they were ashamed of me. Jail is not a good place for women to go to."***
>
> **Kabul**

For this woman's colleague, also jailed, the consequences could have meant that her marriage plans might collapse: *"at that time I was engaged to be married and I did not want my fiancé's family to know what had happened to me. Once we were married I told my husband as I had a bad pain in my heart that I had kept the story from him. He cried and asked why I had not asked for his help. He believed that I was innocent and that I should not have been put in jail for trying to do humanitarian work."*

Most of the women described feeling isolated in their work during the years of banishment from their rightful places within the active office. And although they all acknowledged the essential support they had from their local counterparts, nevertheless, the years of Taliban rule were often lonely. And aside from the practical difficulties of keeping abreast of developments, it was hard to feel part of something bigger than themselves.

> ***"I could not feel part of a team I never saw. Sometimes a particular colleague would come to our houses using the darkness of the night and a cloth on his head to hide himself. He was very supportive and helped us very much with our work. Now I feel we have wakened up from a nightmare because, believe me, if something had happened in those times we would not have been allowed to live on in this country – we would be dead!"*** **Kandahar**

Out in the community, WFP female staff usually enjoyed the respect of both men and women, although the bulk of their efforts were for women and children, as a Faizabad-based colleague recalled: *"We never had any problems with local men in carrying out our duties. They always provided everything we asked for or needed and we*



**Sanam Maslakh Camp Herat**

*travelled a lot for our work, always receiving good treatment from the people. Our only problems were with the government (Northern Alliance) so sometimes it was easier to work in the villages where their power was not so strong and we could even lift the burqa and no-one would complain."*

At all times it was of great importance to accurately target the most needy and destitute members of the community.The women involved in the regular surveys knew thatbeing seen to benefit the "right" people was almost as necessary as feeding them because it maintained WFP's credibility:

> ***"People would say that these five breads are worth everything but they also saw that WFP really gave help to the poorest people. We directly distributed hand to hand on occasion and our surveys were conducted house-to-house with the help of local mosques and double-checked for accuracy and fairness. We wanted to give to the poorest and most vulnerable families and in Mazar we surveyed almost 20,000 families, temporarily employing 960 people to visit each home and fill in the questionnaires. By these means and others, most people understood WFP's intentions and were satisfied."*** **Mazar-e-Sharif**

For Afghan women even to consider working while the Taliban were in power they required the unquestioning support of their immediate family: WFP female staff were no exception. While many families were glad to have at least one member working for financial reasons, there were many issues, worries and doubts, which accompanied the reality of allowing a woman in the family to work:

> ***"The Taliban were bad people. If they found a mistake in a family they would beat up the men in it or make jokes about the father in front of people. If you were caught having a television, for example, they might paint the father's face black and then force him to walk in the bazaar to humiliate him. All families were worried about this sort of problem so they asked their family members to behave so that they could avoid this kind of trouble."*** **Mazar-i-Sharif**

Other women gratefully acknowledged the help given to them, particularly by their fathers, to continue their work. Some husbands also came in for praise for supporting their wives and allowing them the freedom to choose for themselves over their professional commitments. In several cases, men left jobs and even their homes, as one woman in Mazar described, to protect and allow a wife or daughter to do her job:

> ***"My father helped me a lot with my work and my mother was very happy that I did it. They saw how serious I was so my father left Islamabad and came to live with me in Mazar just so that I could fulfil my duties for WFP."***
>
> **Mazar-e-Sharif**



# 3

# The Burqa

***"I would have worn three burqas if it meant I could still do my job – it was not important for me."*** **Mazar-i-Sharif**

***"I hated the burqa - I still hate it. I feel I have lost my beauty under the burqa."*** **Kandahar**

Probably the single most powerful symbol for the wider world of Afghan women's lack of personal freedom and choice, the *burqa* was, nevertheless, an essential working tool for all female employees of WFP. Without it they would have had to stay at home. It remains a necessary item of clothing for most women even now, whether accustomed to it by older traditions or due to the more recent enforcement by the Taliban.

Many practical problems are associated with the burqa – headaches, discomfort in the heat, difficulty in seeing properly: *"It gave me problems with my eyes and now I have to wear these things – glasses!"* and trouble walking confidently when getting used to it in the beginning. But there were other aspects which, for some women, made the *burqa* more an item of punishment than of clothing:

> ***"How did it feel? I felt as if I was not a human. I started to wear it when I was 22 and I was standing on my children – I could not see them. Why should we cover ourselves? What did we do wrong? It felt like a punishment and I felt shame because when you do something wrong, that is shameful to you; you cover your face and hide it – that is how the burqa made me feel. If I had had the choice I would never have looked at a burqa!"*** **Kandahar**

Another woman said she feels shy when she wears the *burqa* and that it is hard to speak to people wearing it because of the shame she feels in being covered in this way. For her an open face is normal and a sign that she is a human being, not an object of shame to be hidden away. She is waiting for the day when it will no longer be necessary and is already glad of the reinstated freedom to wear nail colour, bracelets and other jewellery – an "offence" under strict Taliban rule for which she was verbally reprimanded on at least one occasion.

But wearing a *burqa* was not by any means a guarantee of safety for women in public, as the following incidents describe:

> ***"Once I went to the tailor without a moharam*** **(accompanying male relative)** ***and suddenly people from Vice and Virtue came to me and asked where was my***

*moharam, where was my husband? Three or four Taliban beat me with a leather whip on the back of my neck – it was very painful and I was hurt and humiliated because it was done in the street. Even after 25 days the marks of the beating were on my neck. This was the treatment we could expect at any time under the Taliban."* **Kabul**

*"I was travelling on a bus which had curtains on each window and was for women only when the woman in front of me uncovered her face. A Talib entered the bus and beat her five or six times, telling her she was not a good woman to show her face. Another older woman on the bus spoke out and said to him, 'Why are you on this bus? It is for females only!' So he hit her also and shouted, 'Woman – you do not have the right to talk!' This was our life in this time – we could not show ourselves to men, not even our voices."* **Kabul**

Considering that WFP women are in very public jobs, asking for and gaining the respect and trust of the people they are empowered to help, these descriptions of the psychological impact of being rendered effectively invisible offer a glimpse into the steadfast commitment shown by them all as they continued to work in an environment actively dedicated to denying all women public credibility and purpose.

Incredibly, one member of staff related a humorous arrival at her old office for the first time after the fall of the Taliban:



**A WFP Food Distribution in Maslakh camp, Herat**

*"Wearing burqa was horrible – before the Taliban we felt as if we were as safe as men but when I wore it I felt I was nothing, with no value, low and with no reputation. When I returned from Islamabad I travelled in ordinary clothes and when I reached the office everyone was speaking to me in English and as if I was a foreigner. They did not recognise me of course as they had only heard my voice before - I had to tell them who I was!"* **Kabul**



# 1

# WFP Women At Work

***"Women you should not step outside your residence.... Women should not create such opportunity to attract the attentions of useless people who will not look at them with a good eye. .... In case women are required to go outside the residence for the purposes of education, social needs or social services, they should cover themselves in accordance with Islamic Sharia regulation. If women are going outside with fashionable, ornamental, tight and charming clothes to show themselves, they will be cursed by the Islamic Shura and should never expect to go to heaven."***

Extract from a decree issued by the Religious Police, Kabul, November 1996 – Ahmed Rashid, The Taliban, I.B. Tauris, London, 2000.



# 4

# Motivation, Inspiration and Purpose

*"I wanted to support the women of my native country and worked to rebuild this country and to gain respect for women. During the Taliban there was no respect for women and we had no rights – we were like a toy for the men. But Afghanistan has many brave women who want to fight alongside the men and work for this country.* **Kabul**

Taliban regulations made public life not only difficult for women but also undeniably dangerous. So why did WFP female staff persevere in the face of serious threats and obstacles which stood in their way? Three principal reasons were cited overall: a sense of duty towards disadvantaged women in Afghanistan, community response to WFP projects and personal economic pressures within the family.

> ***"There has been no-one to encourage Afghan women for training and education for a long time, plus I need to 'replace' myself as I will not work forever. If I had not gone to work many women in our community would have suffered.The office needs the services of national women to run specific projects and ensure that needs are met."***
> **Kandahar**

Initial food assessment surveys to determine specific needs are conducted house-to-house through interviews and evaluations that target the poorest and most vulnerable members of the community. This gives female staff an invaluable role at a primary level as they can freely access those parts of Afghan society barred to men. WFP female staff consider themselves a vital part of the surveying and monitoring units. Where aid projects are run in hospitals, it is again women who play a major role in ensuring that both distribution of food and health education programmes are accurately focused.

> ***"I like my work and I like to help the poorest women. The Taliban pressed me and pressed me not to work but if I stayed at home who would help the poor women because if women were not available to monitor the female projects then no one could. Often I had to explain myself to the Taliban saying that if I did not go to work then no-one else could do it so they would say I was right and that I was 'a good woman'."***
> **Herat**

For others it was the strength of the response from the community that carried them through, and the knowledge that WFP's help *"made the difference between life and death for some very poor families."* At one point in Kabul the Taliban closed the WFP women-run bakeries in the city, and women in the city protested, saying that now the Taliban

would have to feed them. The bakeries were re-opened again the following day and staff recall feeling that this was a huge support for their work and striking evidence of the need for WFP in the community. In Kandahar, one woman said the local people knew her well and said she was *"like Paracetomol – she could relieve pain."* She and her colleague were asked to parties and celebrations and were prayed for constantly.

> ***"Poor, vulnerable women prayed for us and said that without this aid, life was not possible for them. They did not think about clothing or about furniture during these times - all that was important was food. For more than 23 years this has been the case in Afghanistan and I have been proud to have helped my people in a small way."*** **Kandahar**

> ***"People in Afghanistan always respected WFP staff and in the local areas we were always welcome. You always heard very good things about WFP, especially in the field when we were carrying out our duties."*** **Faizabad**

In Herat people told the single female employee at that time that they felt they were lucky she was still working for them *"in this hard time when many women were poor and just staying at home like beggars."* For a considerable period she was *"the only person entering their homes to see what they needed and to double check against the mullah's list of the poorest families because we did not trust him. They liked me for doing that and for being kind to them."*

Lastly, the need to earn money for their families also provided WFP female staff with the extra incentive to persevere with their professional activities. In some cases they were the only ones with the chance of earning. Elder siblings had left the country, younger ones did not have the requisite qualifications due to the closure of schools and universities and fathers were often unable to find proper, or sufficient work.

> ***"I wanted to feed my family and because I have an education I wanted to use it for them and for the needy people. When women are not in society it is only half of one so I wanted to put myself into public life.*** **Kabul**



**WFP Female Staff Kabul**

> ***"I am the only one of my family who is coming out to work so all of my family were looking out for me and financially it was important to us to have an income. Even a king needs money for shoes – if you have none you cannot buy food, clothes, anything."*** **Kandahar**

And while all accepted this responsibility, it was often stressful and distressing when a mother had to leave children behind. For one woman this difficulty has continued beyond the Taliban years as her children remain in Islamabad while she is based in Kabul.

> ***"Financially it has been good for my family because I want to educate them but on the other side it has affected my children a lot. In 1998, when my youngest child was only three,, she really needed me to be with her and one time, when I was coming to Islamabad late in the day she said, 'You are coming in the dark time and you leave in the dark time so I cannot see you.' Another time she tied our hands together so that when I moved she would feel me and know that I was leaving. It was - it still is - very difficult for me to leave my family and not see them."*** **Kabul**



# 5

# Thoughts For The Future

*"We are waiting for the best time to come to our country. I feel very confident to work for it. We all want the situation to become normal again and for Afghanistan to take its place with other countries."*

**WFP staff member in Kandahar**

Contrary to many media reports which concentrate on the dependent and vulnerable state of most of Afghanistan's women, WFP female staff present a positive and optimistic role for women in the country's future. It is their hope that women can continue to develop and expand on their already considerable achievements and they are very happy to be re-united with their male and international colleagues.

While grateful to the UN for supporting and assisting them throughout very difficult times, many would also like to see greater recognition of personal qualifications and experience; they feel their unique experiences can also be of use in the international arena. Some women urged more training for young women joining the UN:

> ***"I think WFP needs to offer more help to Afghan women to get education and training through their work – English and computer training are both essential. Afghan women should not be blamed for not speaking English fluently when we come for jobs because we were not able to learn properly."*** **Kandahar**

Many working women of WFP have lasting impressions which have strengthened their commitment to secure not just the freedom to work but also to expand this freedom to include as many women as possible. Incidents such as a disrupted wedding belong to the past but provide a motive for persevering:

> ***"The third of August 2001 was my wedding but the Taliban came to where we were celebrating saying that they were looking for foreigners. They said that because I worked for a foreign agency then I must have invited them to my wedding. They were searching my neighbour's house where the men were gathered as none of the restaurants were open at that time and then they wanted to come to where the women were. I was shocked! I was the bride and this was my wedding day. I had already promised them I had stopped working (after being in the jail) so why had they come? The pictures of my wedding day show how worried I was because I had the work computer and many documents in my home in a locked cupboard. I was wearing the key. But***

***the neighbours stood up for me and asked them how it was that they could come into this place, which was for women. They searched for 15 minutes and left."*** **Kabul**

It is no wonder that many WFP female workers regard the demise of the Taliban as good news for the country's positive future. The chance to work again with their male colleagues is a huge step towards that future – both for them as individuals as well as for the agency as a whole. *"The work is developing and widening and missions are even being developed for national women as well as men. Restrictions have gone and we feel good about that."*

***"I am feeling happy in everything. I have no problems. I can go everywhere and I do not have to take a moharam. I even go up in helicopters so my husband says I am very brave!"*** **Herat**

For all the women, the restored entitlement to work in freedom means the most; *"the right to work, to talk and work with male colleagues and share our ideas is the biggest change since the Taliban collapsed. We are safe in our offices, can communicate with the world, have more experiences, go to the doctors, take taxis – go shopping! And we are not forced to wear the burqa any longer – at last it is optional.*



**The first WFP female staff meeting held in Kabul after the fall of the Taliban**

*Insh'Allah, soon we will also have the right to drive. These are the biggest and best differences."*

***WFP Afghanistan is fortunate to have such women on its staff. They, and others like them, deserve every chance to fulfil their professional ideals, to develop their abilities and, in so doing, serve the country and the people they love.***

# METHODOLOGY

The interviews were conducted in the four cities of Kabul, Mazar, Herat and Kandahar between March 10th and May 14th 2002. A total of 11 women were interviewed. The interviews were private and confidential, due to the personal nature of some of the questions. A photograph was taken of each person who attended an interview session. Some women staff did not want their photos to be used for personal reasons.

From the outset, it was clear that some respondents found the process of recalling traumatic periods in their lives therapeutic.

Telling personal stories to an interested outsider gave some respondents the chance to reflect not only on events relevant to the project, but also on the wider aspects of Afghanistan's recent history and their feelings about that.

Interviews varied in duration from less than one hour to two hours, depending on the discussion and individual responses to the questions.

# WFP

WORLD FOOD PROGRAMME

In conservative Afghanistan, women's movements, dress and behaviour have always been circumscribed but, during the Taliban regime, extreme limitations and definitions of female conduct metamorphosed from a debatable cultural practice to a strictly enforced state policy.

Enforced by the Religious Police and supplemented by radio broadcasts, edicts such as these had a devastating effect on female society, especially in urban centres such as Kabul and Herat, where relative freedoms to be educated and to work outside the home had been the norm for many years. Some of the edicts concerning education and work were intended to be in place only until such time as the Taliban could provide separate facilities and transport for men and women. But in the meantime, some access to employment was made available for women to work in the health sector – a loophole that WFP, other UN agencies, and NGOs capitalised on as much as possible. However, even this limited provision was under constant threat.

> ***"Not being allowed to work was the worst problem – we had to do it in secret or say we were health workers after 1996 because we were not allowed to go to the office. In June 1998, when I was monitoring the stores of the Jamuriat Hospital in Kabul, I was requested to go to the president's office. When I got there he held out the phone to me and a Talib official from the Ministry of Public Health asked me why I was working like this and said that if I wanted to continue he will call the Vice and Virtue officials and put me in jail. 'You are my sister', he said, 'and I advise you to go back to your home.' We had a lot of problems with security, we couldn't come to the office and the lack of contact created many problems."*** **Kabul**

All the women interviewed who worked for WFP throughout the Taliban regime suffered continuous feelings of insecurity and fear due to the uncertainty about the type and extent of punishments that could be imposed by the Religious Police. Even when permission to work was granted to selected female staff, such as in Mazar in 1997,

when the WFP office opened for the first time under Taliban rule, all the women had to wear *burqa* and two women from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were required to accompany them at all times so that *"...we did not do bad talking to any people. If the Taliban guards did not turn up then we could not go to work that day and had to stay at home."* And although, *"we tried to be perfectly patient with the rules – we dressed in the burqa, we took a moharam (male relative) with us and we did not talk to our colleagues or other men"* still women experienced frequent harassment from Taliban officials who would question them about their job, their salary, why they did not stay at home and at times even watched their houses to see who visited.

> ***"Sometimes work people would come to my house and the Taliban would watch and ask why these people came to my house. They would say to each other that I was a Kofi Annan person and who was I to be having all these people to my house."*** **Mazar-i- Sharif**

A female colleague recalls that the Taliban were commonly known in Mazar as *"...very dry people because when they were in power there was no rain and no snow, so no good weather for growing food."* Sometime later in 1997 this colleague left for Islamabad when the Taliban subsequently closed the WFP offices (for a temporary period) and insisted that Afghans should not work with foreigners or international agencies any longer.

Each of the women interviewed remember the years under the Taliban as being very difficult and frequently dangerous but the alternative was to give up and stay at home. This, in the words of one woman, was *"...not a real alternative – we were bored and depressed when we did not go to work."* Another put it more forcibly: *"Can you imagine sitting at home with nothing to do? I have the habit of working and I felt very angry with the government that they restricted us. I felt I was* ***nothing*** *without the work to do!"*

Regularly, there were daily problems simply moving around the city because Taliban police would stop and search any woman they saw travelling alone, with colleagues or even with a male relative brought along for protection.

> ***"I was working in one of the women's bakeries and had to come to the office to get a signature from an office colleague.***


**Woman working in a WFP Bakery in Kabul**

> *I came in a taxi with my female colleagues and handed the form to the guard at the office gate for him to take for signature. Taliban in a Land Cruiser stopped while we were waiting outside the gate and asked us if we were trying to enter the office. I tried to explain about the form and the signature, and that we were working for the bakeries and the poor people but one of the Taliban shouted, 'Don't look at me! I am going to punish you for trying to enter the office.' Then he took my handbag - office equipment like staplers, computer cables and such were there - he opened my bag and began to take things out of it, throwing them and not caring when they hit me. I asked him what he was doing and he shouted again, 'Don't talk - if you do I will take you to jail immediately!' So I stopped talking, did not look and when they had left I went home and stayed there for a while until I could find the courage to begin working again."* **Kabul**

One woman working in extremely conservative Kandahar detailed some of the daily struggle to continue with her work:

> *"During the Taliban regime we accepted a lot of risk to continue our work because, really, it was dangerous and difficult. My colleague and I were the only two ladies who had permission to work with UN agencies in Kandahar after our office showed that the work could not be done without*

*our involvement. No men could monitor the women's projects so we were needed for all these situations. We were not allowed to use the UN vehicles for work so the office hired my colleague's private car and we were each accompanied by our husbands - it was good fun sometimes. But mostly it was difficult – my colleague's husband left his job with UNDP in order to provide help to his wife and eventually my husband also had trouble with his work and joined WFP officially as a Food Aid Monitor so that he could continue as my moharam. In that time I attended 5 workshops in Islamabad in great secrecy and had to pretend I was attending a wedding or other family gathering to explain my absence from the office. And always we had to get permission for everything from the director of the hospital (that we were monitoring). Sometimes it was refused without a clear or proper reason. If we were meeting an international (female) colleague and the meeting went on beyond one hour the director would come to ask what was taking so long. He would tell us to close the meeting immediately which was difficult for us as the visitor was our guest and we could not ask her to leave."* **Kandahar**

As if these and other restrictions were not enough, at various times all WFP female staff were stopped from working completely by the Taliban and spent extended periods at home or, in some luckier cases, in the country office in Islamabad.

*"Being stopped from work was very hard for me. I wanted to leave Afghanistan and forced my father to take me out of the country because I wanted to work. There was no fighting or rape at the beginning of the Taliban in Mazar but we had to stay at home – there was no freedom. After March 2000 we were at home for one year without working."*

**Mazar-e-Sharif**

A strong desire not to be seen as victims, either of gender discrimination or circumstance, characterised all the women interviewed for this booklet and most acknowledged feeling a strong sense of personal duty towards less fortunate women in Afghan society. They were determined to show that:

*"It is possible for a woman to be brave and to work for our country. Most of the women we helped are not educated so we tried to encourage women to understand that with training there were jobs for them to do. I went without sleep to learn English and now I feel I should use the benefit of my education to show that women too can be teachers, tailors, ministers even!"* **Mazar-e-Sharif**

There is no doubt that an enormous resolve was necessary for each and every one of WFP's female staff: first of all to decide to work and then to persevere in the face of many small frustrations and occasionally huge dangers. In a very real way, there was no safe place for these women to work even when limited access to the office was possible. At one time there was an annex in the Kabul office which was for the sole use of female staff. Threats of Taliban interference were always implicit.

*"Once three of us were in the office annex meeting our international (female) boss and suddenly a Talib entered the office and asked us what we were doing there. He was standing at the doorway... Our boss asked him why he had entered the room and he replied that he was coming to see if there was a man in the room with us. So she said quickly that HE was a man, therefore why was he here when it was a room for women only and jumped up to lock the door in front of him so that she could phone to the main office and tell them that a Talib was knocking on the door. When the others came from the main office the Talib said that he was going to tell the government officials that Afghan women were working with foreigners so our office had to promise that we would not come again. After that incident, which was very frightening for us all, we did not go again to the office and only contacted them for urgent matters."* **Kabul**

The professional skills of WFP female staff were essential throughout the Taliban regime (and continue to be so), as many of WFP's programmes are targeted towards the poorest women in Afghanistan, namely the tens of thousands of widows left totally dependent on humanitarian agencies for their survival. To their lasting credit, WFP female staff accepted the challenge to continue their work in situations where their honour and dignity as women were under constant

challenge and surveillance, the potential for imprisonment was ever present and even their lives were under threat by Taliban extremists. They, and other women like them, are the ordinary, and largely unrecognised, heroines of Afghanistan. Not invisible under the *burqa*, but determined and creative individuals dedicated to using their skills and education within the professional arena and committed to improving, where they could, the lives of other, less fortunate women in Afghanistan.



**An Afghan female beneficiary of WFP**



# 2

# Have No Office – Will Travel

*"In general, the Taliban did not recognise the important role of women in our society and so they made everything very difficult for us especially when we tried to do those parts of our jobs which were in the community, mixing with men as well as women."* Kandahar

Denied access to the office, not allowed to speak to male colleagues or international staff, under suspicion if caught with computers or other official equipment, WFP women worked despite these and other obstacles. The complete lack of contact with colleagues created many problems and the lack of an office necessitated creative solutions to find ways to continue and develop the necessary house-to-house surveys, bakery monitoring programmes and other contacts within the beneficiary communities.

In Kabul, once access to any part of the WFP office was out of bounds to female staff, the women had an office on wheels, using UN vehicles until even that permission was revoked by the Taliban. Then they began to use special taxis hired by the office. Despite regulations insisting that a male relative accompanied all females in public, most of the time the women travelled unaccompanied and usually together. *"At the beginning I took my nephew with me and for a while he was a regular feature of my day but then he got tired of the job!"*

Other colleagues had similar problems with the staying power of nephews and brothers and, when stopped alone in a taxi, would say, *"I am a doctor working for the health of the female bakery workers."* In support of this statement they had initially managed to get letters of permission from the Ministry of Public Health that allowed them to work in the health sector and the fact that these letters had long expired was not an issue for the largely illiterate Taliban patrolling the streets.

In Mazar, female WFP staff were also mobile, but they had a non-negotiable extra – a Talib guard who accompanied them every day to their work sites. *"The Talib sat in front (there were three of us women) and he would not speak to us. We had a different one every day. One Talib even put a curtain between us and him, even though we were dressed in burqas and could not be seen! But I have good memories of these guards as they helped us in our work."*

Mazar staff were also at risk if office equipment was found in their homes and one woman recalls a visit from Taliban police looking for the computer she kept there:

These are the heroines of Afghanistan and this book is a glimpse of their story: a collection of personal accounts and experiences of the forbidden labour force that the World Food Programme could never publicly claim during the Taliban era for the sake of their own safety and that of the many food aid projects that could have been banned by the fundamentalist government.

Now that the days of the Taliban are over - the World Food Programme wishes to pay tribute to the spirit and courage of these women in the face of adversity, their inability to lose hope even when confronted by overwhelming odds and their belief in a cause that they found worth risking their lives for – feeding the poor of their country.

We salute them and honour them as veterans of a war that was fought for five years in the shadows against the injustice and inequality that deprived them of their basic human right to employment.

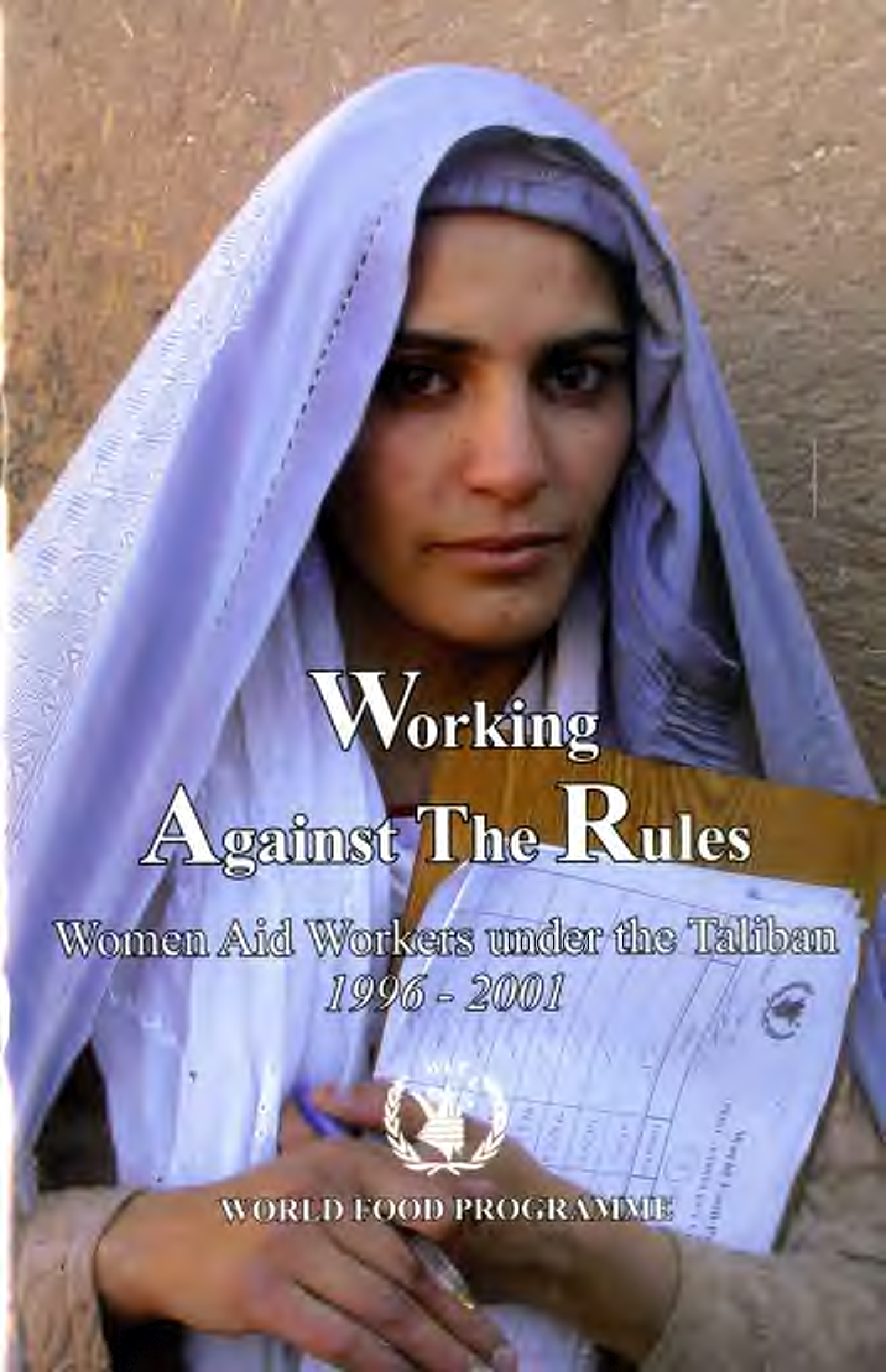
As humanitarian aid workers, they served a noble cause and served it over and above the call of duty. No one will ever know the full story of the threats and fears they faced on a daily basis for these long and dark years.

The World Food Programme is proud to call them its own and is ever grateful for their commitment and hard work in a time when such work was considered illegal by the hard-line Taliban regime.

They have since come out from under the veil of obscurity and now openly do what they could only accomplish with the greatest secrecy before.

They continue working for their country - now in more tolerant times – but their efforts in the troubled past will never be forgotten by the men and women who worked alongside them and the many beneficiaries whom they helped and saved at great risk to themselves and their own.

*James T. Morris*
Executive Director
The World Food Programme


Working
Against The Rules
Women Aid Workers under the Taliban
1996 - 2001
WORLD FOOD PROGRAMME

# Working Against The Rules

## Women Aid Workers under the Taliban

*1996 - 2001*



WFP

WORLD FOOD PROGRAMME

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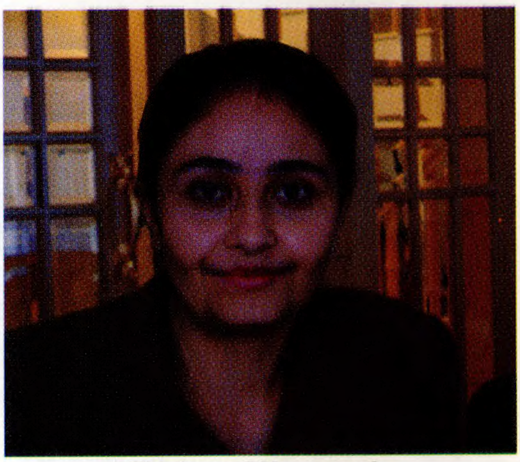
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# INTRODUCTION

This book is dedicated to the brave efforts and sacrifices made by Afghan women who worked to feed the hungry poor of their country under the extremist Taliban regime that banned almost all female employment during its rule over Afghanistan.

They undertook vital humanitarian work that could never have been accomplished without their courage and fortitude. As unofficial staff of the World Food Programme, they faced the daily threat of discovery by Taliban authorities and the horror of possible incarceration to gain access to the most vulnerable victims of hunger and want in Afghanistan – women.

When contact between opposite sexes was mostly forbidden, women aid workers were essential to reach the female beneficiaries that the World Food Programme targeted for food aid.

WFP Bakeries selling bread at a fraction of the market price to needy Afghan women continue operating in Kabul and Mazar and were doing so even during the Taliban era, though managed and run by women who were ostensibly banned from any kind of employment not directly in the health sector.

The World Food Programme needed female intervention and help to make possible many of its development projects in Afghanistan aimed at rehabilitation and reconstruction. Without these local female aid workers, who put their lives and liberty at stake – countless other helpless Afghan women would have suffered - being deprived of the food aid that they badly needed for themselves and their families.

In a country haunted by over two decades of war and nearly half a deçade of drought, these women came forward to help build hope. They did not give in to despair; they battled in secret for their right to choose; they fought for their war-ravaged people and their hungry children and they fought for them against the very law of the land.